

Research Article

Analysis of errors in the writing of content in dissertations and their impact on the learning of foreign languages: A case study in Ghana

Daniel Arkoh Fenyi^{1*} & Richard Morrison²

¹ Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

² Department of Languages, Foso College of Education, Assin Foso, Ghana

*Corresponding Author: fenyigh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The average postgraduate student in Ghana has about 20 years exposure in English language, having been taught and instructed in English from primary to tertiary level. It is, therefore, not far-fetched to expect the postgraduate student to commit minimal to no errors in their L2 writings. The seeming consequential minimal scholarly attention on errors in postgraduate writings regardless of the many studies on students' errors is therefore not surprising. This study is an attempt to identify, categorise and describe the errors in postgraduate dissertations in Ghana and highlight its implications for language teaching. This exploratory qualitative study carries out a content analysis of 20 randomly selected MA, MPhil and PhD dissertations published between 2020 and 2021. The data are analysed using the theory of Error Analysis. After critically assessing the dissertations, seven (7) categories of concord errors were identified and recorded. These are; subject-verb concord errors, inverted subject concord errors, concord errors associated with 'has' and 'have', determiner-noun errors, concord errors on numbers, noun-pronoun antecedent errors and compound subject concord errors. This implies that postgraduate students are prone to errors, hence, the need to introduce or intensify the teaching of English at the postgraduate level.

Keywords: concord errors; error analysis; dissertations; content analysis; language teaching;

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is the most difficult language skill (Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020; Fenyi et al, 2021; Miko, 2018). It becomes even more difficult when done in a second/non-native language (Alahmadi, 2014; Kampookaew, 2020). Writing is a more difficult skill because a good writing goes beyond linguistic knowledge to include knowledge on discourses and genres, the recognition of writing strategies and techniques and the awareness of cultural and social contexts (Burns & Siegel, 2018). Similarly, a good writing involves a good knowledge and effective control of writing elements such as vocabulary, mechanics, content and grammar (Nuruzzaman, Islam & Shuchi, 2018; Rattanadilok Na Phuket & Bidin, 2016). Of all these, grammar is a major problem in students' writing (Abdulkareem, 2013; Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020). The current study focuses on concord errors, which is a "prominent type" of grammatical error (Hassan et al, 2020: 2).

Concord is defined as the "agreement between words in gender, number, case, person, or any other grammatical category that affects the forms of words that share a reference. It is a relation between two elements such that they match each other in terms of some grammatical features." (Hassan et al, 2020: 2). It reflects how the inflectional forms of the different sentence elements relate with themselves (Arthur, 2009). In other words, concord occurs when the morphosyntactic features of one sentence element agrees in number, tense, etc with the others (Mark & Kirsten, 2011). For instance, if an element in a sentence possesses an inflectional form such as a plural noun, the verbal element should be inflected to match with the plurality of the noun (Boahemaa, 2014). Therefore, a concord error occurs when an inflected subject does not agree in number, tense, etc with the verb or any other element it must agree with, such as a pronoun antecedent (Oludare, 2016). The fact that the writings of university students in Ghana are saddled with errors cannot be disputed (Mahama, 2012; Mireku-Gyimah, 2014; Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017). It is against this background that the current study is conducted to reveal the systematicity of the errors in the writings of postgraduate students and its implications on the teaching of English at the postgraduate level.

Research on error in second language writings has been conducted by many language scholars (Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020; Atodo, 2021; Boahemaa, 2014; Dadzie & Bosiwah, 2015; Heryanti et al, 2017; Kampookaew, 2020; Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017; Nurmalia & Nuraeni, 2020; Rahmayani, 2021; Sadih & Royani, 2019; Sermsook et al, 2017). Sermsook et al (2017) investigated the word level and sentence level errors in the writings of English major students in Thai university. Analysing 104 pieces of texts from 26 students, the study found that the most frequently committed errors were capitalisation, spelling, subject-verb agreement, articles, punctuation and fragments. The study also confirmed interlingual and intralingual interferences, limited knowledge on English vocabulary and grammar rules and general carelessness of the learners were the major sources/causes of the errors.

Nurmalia and Nuraeni (2020) examined the errors in the writings of students of Bina Sarana Informatika University. Selecting and analysing 10 essays, the study focused on the grammatical, semantic and substance errors in the essays. The outcome revealed that spelling error was the most dominant error, followed by fragment and punctuation errors. Also, adjective, subject-verb agreement and preposition errors were identified in the essays. Similarly, it was realised that the students committed capitalisation, tenses, verb and literal translation errors. For spelling, which is the dominant, the study reports that students either missed a letter in a word, added more letter, or exchanged a letter when spelling while with fragment errors, most students did not put a subject in a sentence.

In the Ghanaian context, Boahemaa (2014) investigated concord errors in the writings of final year students of Koforidua Senior High/Technical School. After analysing 230 scripts of the students, the study found that subject-verb agreement was the most dominant concord error in the writings. The study also discovered other errors such as pronoun-antecedent errors, inverse subject errors, determiner-noun errors, verb-verb errors, relative pronoun-subject with singular verb errors, coordinated subject errors and construction with more than one concord error. The study also found the inadequate scope of concord topics in the syllabus and textbooks, the general negative attitude of learners towards the study of English, the learners' difficulty in internalizing the concord rules and teachers' ineffective teaching methods are the major causes of the errors. Similarly, Owu-Ewie and Williams (2017) investigated the grammatical and lexical errors in the essays of a purposively sampled 150 second year students from three Senior High Schools in the central region of Ghana. Using a content analysis approach, the qualitative study confirmed that the most dominant grammatical error in the writings was tense errors, followed by subject-verb agreement errors. The other errors identified were article errors, prepositional errors and number errors. The study also identified that the lexical errors were caused by homophone and semantic problems. Based on the findings, the study recommended that language should have understanding of 11/12 interferences, have sufficient knowledge of students' writing errors and employ effective language teaching methods.

The earlier studies have focused on pre-tertiary students (Boahemaa, 2014) and undergraduate students (Nurmalia & Nuraeni, 2020). Errors in the writings of postgraduate students have not received maximum attention (Oludare, 2016). In the Ghanaian context, where English is a second language, classroom instructions are done in English from the basic to tertiary level. Aside that, English is studied as a core subject from the basic to tertiary level. Therefore, a student at the postgraduate level ideally has about two-decade exposure in English. It is, therefore, expected that such learner would be perfect or near-perfect in the target language. Hence, it is not surprising that language scholars have not deemed postgraduate writings to be error prone worthy of scholarly attention (Oludare, 2016). The current study highlights the errors in postgraduate writings and its implications for language teaching in the Ghanaian context. Error Analysis (EA) is the underpinning framework for the study (Setiyorini et al, 2020). Errors are the systematic deviations or incorrect use of grammatical items that reveal a learner's knowledge in the (second) language (Catabay, 2019). EA examines these deviations committed by the second language learner (Yusri & Jufri, 2018). EA reveals how students learn the language, what they know and how they apply the knowledge of the second language (Manuel, 2019). Given that errors are indispensable in second language learning (Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017), it is important for a continuous empirical investigation into the types of errors ESL learners commit so that the appropriate strategies could be designed to mitigate the situation (Setiyorini et al, 2020). The outcome of an EA aids language instructors to identify, categorise and describe the errors committed in the learning of second language (Batu et al., 2018). The data realised from EA can inform the language teachers on the most effective and efficient teaching methodologies, techniques, strategies and materials to adopt in the language classroom to help the students over their difficulties.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The study aims at identifying and describing the concord errors in these theses by conducting a content analysis of selected theses authored by Ghanaian students in Ghanaian universities, and to achieve this, Israel's (2020) exploratory qualitative design is adopted. The exploratory qualitative design helps researchers to explore a particular phenomenon, identify the systematicity of the phenomenon and be able to ascertain, if applicable, the cause and effect of the phenomenon. This aids researchers to be able to come out with robust findings that can enhance or curb the phenomenon. The 20 theses consisting of 7 MA, 12 MPhil and one Ph.D student were randomly selected for the study. 87 expressions containing concord errors were extracted from the selected theses and analysed and categorised according to the different types of concord errors (Boahemaa, 2014). For each faulty expression, the researchers propose the correct form. Anonymity and confidentiality of the writers are ensured since the ultimate goal of the study is not to condemn any postgraduate student but rather make a case for the introduction or intensification of English language course (s) at the postgraduate level.

The study adopted the four steps described by Hassan et al (2020) in the analysis of the data. The steps are:

1. Collection of sample

20 random theses published between 2020 and 2021 from 6 universities in Ghana.

2. Identification of errors

The researchers read all the theses for the identification of concord errors.

3. Description of errors

The errors were classified and categorised according to the types of concord.

4. Implications of errors

The systematicity of the errors was highlighted and discussed. The result is to inform teaching pedagogy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While emphasising that every single theses contained one or two errors such as spelling errors, punctuation errors and tense errors, not all the theses recorded concord errors though a significant number did as illustrated figure 1.1 below. Out of the 20 theses assessed, 14 representing 70% contained concord errors while the remaining 6 representing 30% had no concord errors though contained some other forms of errors (see figure 1.1). This illustrates the assertion of Alghazo and Alshraideh (2020; p. 1) that “errors occur in the writing of almost all non-native students”.

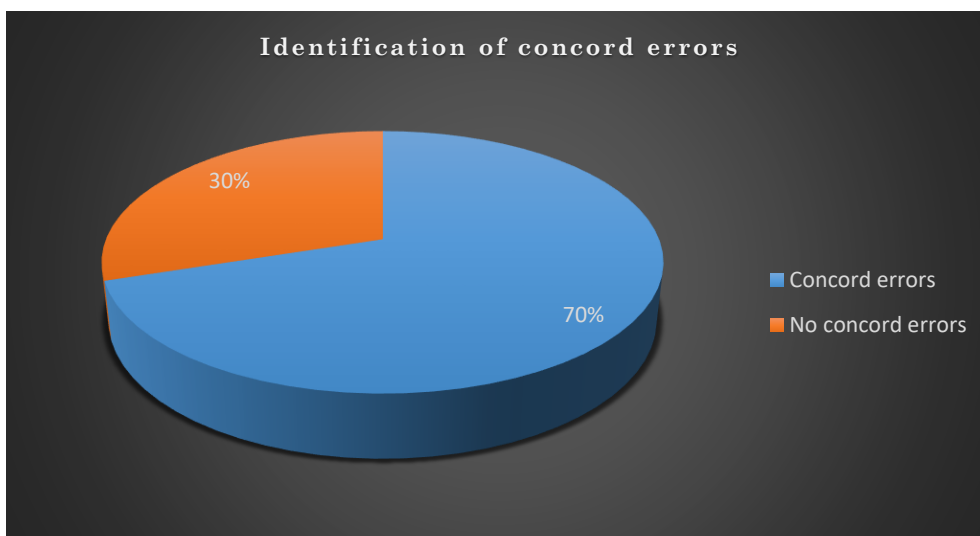


Figure 1. Identification of concord errors
Source: Fieldwork, 2021

After critically assessing the 14 scripts, eight (8) categories of concord errors were identified and recorded. These are

- 1) Subject- Verb Concord Errors
- 2) Inverted subject Concord Errors
- 3) Concord Errors associated with 'has' and 'have'
- 4) Determiner-Noun Concord Errors
- 5) Concord Errors on Numbers
- 6) Noun-Pronoun Antecedent Concord Errors
- 7) Compound Subject Concord Errors

For each of these thematic areas, relevant excerpts and sentences containing the concord errors are cited to explain the themes. The correct forms have been suggested as well.

1. Errors Associated with Subject- Verb Concord

Quirk and Greenbaum (2000) believe that subject-verb concord or the concord of number between the subject and verb is the most important concord issue in grammar. The general anticipation is that, a singular subject would select a singular verb while a plural subject selects a plural verb. However, an examination of the scripts reveals that it is not all the time that the post graduate students complied with the principle. Excerpts 1 to 4 illustrate the errors.

Excerpt 1

The speaking of English occur at the latter part of the teaching and learning process.

Excerpt 2

The initial message provide details of the received language.

Excerpt 3

The contexts of an utterance largely determines whether it flouts the politeness theory or not.

Excerpt 4

Their perceptions about the L1 influences their attitude towards it.

A look at excerpts 1 and 2 reveals that the subjects are singular, so the singular forms of the verbs, that is, *occurs* and *provides*, should have been selected but the students used the plural forms of the verb. Similar principle applies to excerpts 3 and 4 where the plural verbs *determine* and *influence* should have been selected to correspond with the plural subjects.

2. Inverted Subject Concord Errors

In inverted subject constructions, the noun phrase that follows the verb is the subject. Hence, the verb must agree in number with the noun phrase that comes after it.

Excerpt 5

There is insufficient teaching and learning materials on language.

Excerpt 6

There have been an increase in the patronage of the L1.

Excerpts 5 and 6 are inverted constructions. The subjects are “teaching and learning materials” and “an increase” and should match with the verbs *are* and *has* respectively.

3. Concord Errors Associated with ‘Has’ and ‘Have’

‘Has’ is a singular verb and must match with a singular subject while ‘have’ is plural and must match with a plural subject. However, in excerpts 18 and 19 below, the principle is flouted.

Excerpt 7

One of the languages have become nearly extinguished in the society.

Excerpt 8

The illiterate market woman have had some informal training in the second language.

Excerpts 7 and 8 have ‘one’ and ‘woman’ as the subjects respectively, hence, should match with the verb *has* but the students violated the principle and used *have* instead.

4. Determiner-Noun Concord Errors

This is where a singular determiner item is followed by a plural count noun and vice versa, as illustrated in excerpts 9 to 11.

Excerpt 9

This two languages have proven to be difficult for early grade learners.

Excerpt 10

He could use these skill to persuade the listeners.

Excerpt 11

Those antecedent must be taken into consideration.

Clearly, *these*, *this* and *that* are the appropriate determiners for the nominal expressions in excerpts 9, 10 and 11 respectively.

5. Concord Errors on Numbers

When specific numbers are involved, the quantity of the number should agree with the noun that follows it. Hence, if the number is singular, the noun that follows must be singular too and vice versa.

Excerpt 12

Every multilingual society speaks three or more language or dialect.

Excerpt 13

English is learnt as a subject in the first three year of the child’s education in Ghana.

The structure of excerpts 12 and 13 are wrongly stated. While excerpt 12 should read ‘*three or more languages*’, excerpt 13 should read ‘*first three years*’

6. Noun-Pronoun Antecedent Concord Errors

Ordinarily, a singular pronoun should have a singular noun as referent while a plural pronoun should have a plural noun ((Krishnamurthy et al, 2010). In excerpts 16 and 17, the students have applied the principle wrongly.

Excerpt 16

I needed to understand lexical items and its formation processes.

Excerpt 17

Every decision has their consequence.

In excerpt 16, *lexical items* is the antecedent for the pronoun *its*. In the context, such correlation is wrong since the nominal is a plural item and the pronoun is singular. Appropriately, *its* should be replaced with *their*. Similarly, in excerpt 17, *every decision* should ideally have *its*, not *their*, as the pronoun antecedent.

7. Compound-Subject Concord Errors

A coordinated subject is expected to be treated as a plural subject and must go with a plural verb but excerpts 18 and 19 below flout the principle.

Excerpt 18

Mensah and Obeng (2014) postulates that speaking is an essential language acquisition skill.

Excerpt 19

My mother and adviser stay abroad, where English is L1 while I live in Ghana.

Excerpt 18 has a compound subject and should attract *postulate* but the student selected the singular counterparts rather. However, in 19, even though the subject is coordinated, it refers to the same person, hence, the use of singular verb *stays* is appropriate.

Discussion

English is a second language in Ghana (Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017). It is taught and studied in schools, from the basic level to the tertiary (Dadzie & Bosiwah, 2015). The current structure of education in Ghana indicates that a postgraduate student would have been taught, studied and instructed in English language for 18 years (6 years primary, 3 years JHS, 3 years SHS, 4 year undergraduate and 2 years master's). It is therefore worrisome that, after 18 years of formal exposure in the language, a postgraduate student would still commit errors. Even though errors are inherent in second language learning and usage (Owu-Ewie & Williams, 2017), when they are committed by postgraduate students, it sends signals of the falling standards of English (Boahemaa, 2014; Dadzie & Bosiwah, 2015).

Errors are supposed to be systematic (Atodo, 2021). In the data, some of these systematicities are revealed. First, majority of the sentences are complex (Oludare, 2016). Complex sentences are basically made up of clauses joined together with a subordinating conjunction. Clearly, the formation of complex sentences proves challenging for the postgraduate students. Second, majority of the sentences do not have the subject and verb juxtaposed close to each other (Oriaku, 2006). Obviously, when other sentence elements come in between the subject and the verb, students tend to confuse the subject with some of the elements and end up choosing a wrong verb form. Third, the interference of the L1 in the formation of L2 structures cannot be overemphasised (Alghazo & Alshraideh, 2020; Owu-Ewie & Lomotey, 2016). Fourth, over generalised application of the concord rules. For instance, in "My mother and adviser stay abroad..." (excerpt 19), the writer has applied the compound-subject principle, meanwhile, notionally, the coordinated subject refers to the same person. This shows that the students have not sufficiently internalised the rules of English concord (Boahemaa, 2014).

From the foregoing, it is clear that postgraduate students are not immune to concord errors. This has implications for language teaching and learning at the postgraduate level. First, English teaching must be introduced/intensified at the postgraduate level. It should not be taken for granted that postgraduate students have sufficient exposure in the language so anything superficial is enough. Universities must introduce core English courses at the postgraduate level and ensure that all students awarded with postgraduate certificates have gone through the course and passed. Second, data indicate that certain topics such as complex sentences, compound/coordinated subjects, etc prove to be quite difficult for ESL learners, even at the postgraduate level. Therefore, teachers of English should prioritise these challenging topics and teach them well. Third, the writing of theses and other formal materials should be supervised, inspected and reviewed by professional proofreaders (Hassan et al, 2020). Students, regardless of whatever level, should take the learning of English more seriously as well.

4. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has explored the concord errors in the postgraduate theses and dissertations in Ghana, using 20 master's and PhD dissertations. Far from recording the frequencies of occurrences of the errors as done in many of the earlier studies, the current study sought to identify, categorise and describe the concord errors and highlight their implications for language teaching. Seven categories of concord errors were identified and discussed. These seven are;

1. Subject- Verb Concord Errors
2. Inverted subject Concord Errors
3. Concord Errors associated with 'has' and 'have'
4. Determiner-Noun Concord Errors
5. Concord Errors on Numbers
6. Noun-Pronoun Antecedent Concord Errors
7. Compound Subject Concord Errors

As typical of qualitative studies, it is difficult to generalise the findings. It is, therefore, recommended that future studies on concord errors could adopt quantitative or mixed methods so that the sample could be more representative and the outcome generalizable. Again, a future study may also consider the other aspects of grammatical errors such as spelling, punctuation and tense errors.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The main author considered the design and analysis, collected the data, performed the analysis, and wrote the paper. The co-author deliberated with the design of the research, collected the data, and performed the coding and thematic analysis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

REFERENCES

- Abdulkareem, N. (2013). An Investigation Study of Academic Writing Problems Faced by Arab Postgraduate Students at University Technology of Malaysia. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(9), 1552-1555. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.9.1552-1557>
- Alahmadi, N.S. (2014). Errors Analysis: A Case Study of Saudi Learner's English Grammatical Speaking Errors. *Arab World English Journal*. 5 (4) 84-98

- Alghazo, K.M & Alshraideh, M.K. (2020). Grammatical Errors Found in English Writing: A Study from Al-Hussein Bin Talal University. *International Education Studies*, 13 (9) 1-9
- Arthur, A. M. (2009). *Teaching Concord at the Junior High School*. M. A. thesis. University of Ghana.
- Atodo, O. W. (2021). A Study of Concord Errors among Students of The Federal Polytechnic Idah. *International Journal of Innovative Language, Literature & Art Studies* 9 (2), 9-14
- Batu, P. N. F. L., Barasa, L. P. L., & Sitepu, V. T. (2018). Grammatical Errors in Students Speaking English: An Error Analysis on Indonesian Maritime Students. *Asian EFL Journal*, 20(7), 88–93.
- Boahemaa, R. (2014). *The study of concord errors in the writing of students of Koforidua Senior High Technical School*. [MPhil thesis] University of Ghana
- Burns, A, & and Siegel, J. (Eds). (2018). *International Perspectives on Teaching the Four Skills in ELT: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Catabay, M. Q. (2019). Error Analysis in Sentence Writing of Second Language Learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 24(4.2), 64–79.
- Dadzie, G. & Bosiwah, L. (2015). Spelling Errors among Junior High School Students in the Cape Coast Metropolis. *Journal of Language, Linguistics and Literature*, 1 (3) 46-54
- Fenyi, K., Jones-Mensah, I., Tabiri, M.O. & Owusu, E. (2021). Teaching listening skills in senior high schools in Ghana: issues and directions. *Journal of English Education* 7 (1) 77-102
- Hassan, I., Azmi, M.N.L. & Atek, E.S.E. (2020). *An Analysis of English Concord Errors in Selected Nigerian Newspapers*
- Heryanti, R., Sucipto, M.H. & Makmur (2017). The analysis of common grammatical errors in writing narrative essay of English study program students At Jambi University. *Edukasi: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pengajaran* 4 (2) 83-92
- Israel, P. C. (2020). Exploring Grammatical Errors in Teaching Materials. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 10, 620-633. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2020.105038>
- Kampookaew, P. (2020). An Analysis of Grammatical Errors Made by Thai EFL University Students in an EAP writing Class: Issues and Recommendations. *REFLECTIONS*, 27 (2) 246-273
- Krishnamurthy, S., et al (2010). An analysis of English errors made by Polytechnic of Namibia students. *NJLC*, 4 (2).
- Mahama, E. S. (2012). Ghanaian English and its implications for academic writing: A case study of English on the Navrongo campus of university for development studies, Ghana. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(11), 56-63.
- Manuel, J. B. (2019). Sentence Errors Committed in the Paragraph Writing among Senior High School Students. *Asian EFL Journal*, 23(3.4), 334– 351.
- Miko, A.J. (2018) *Analysis of students grammatical errors in writing*. [Undergraduate thesis]. Ar-Raniry State Islamic University.
- Mireku-Gyimah, P. B. (2014). An analysis in the English of final year university students: A case study at the University of Mines and Technology. *Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics (LELTAL)*, 2(4), 2347-6575.
- Nurmalia, L. & Nuraeni, C. (2021). An Analysis of Errors in English Writing: A Case Study the Third Semester Students of UBSI. *Jurnal Arbitrer*, 8 (1) 46-50.
- Nuruzzaman, M., Islam, A. S., & Shuchi, I. J. (2018). An analysis of errors committed by Saudi non-English major students in the English paragraph writing: A study of comparisons. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 9(1), 31-39.
- Oludare, O.J. (2016). Concord errors in postgraduates' dissertations and theses. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 5 (1), 1-7.
- Oriaku, R. (2006). *The basic principles of the sentence*. Olayinka, A.I., V.O. Adetimirin and A. Ojebode. (Eds). Scholarly writing and publication. Ibadan: Postgraduate School. pp: 49 – 66.
- Owu-Ewie, C. & Williams, R. (2017). Grammatical and Lexical Errors in Students' English Composition Writing: The Case of Three Senior High Schools (SHS) in the Central Region of Ghana. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 14 (8), 463-482
- Owu-Ewie, C., & Lomotey, C. F. (2016). L1 (Akan) interference errors in L2 (English) writing: The case of three junior high school students in Ghana. *American Journal of Language and Literacy*, 1, A1-A18. Retrieved from <http://www.ASRAresearch.org/ajll-vol-1-no-1-2016/>
- Quirk R. and Greenbaum, S. (2000). A University Grammar of English. London: Longman.
- Rattanadilok Na Phuket, P. & Bidin, S. J. (2016). Native language interference in writing: A case study of Thai EFL learners. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching & Research*, 4(16), 25-36.
- Sermsook, K., Liamnimitr, J., & Pochakorn, R. (2017). An analysis of errors in written English sentences: A case study of Thai EFL students. *English Language Teaching*, 10 (3), 101-110.
- Sadiah, S. & Royani, S.A. (2019). An analysis of grammatical errors in students' writing descriptive text. *PROJECT*. 2 (6) 764-770.
- Setiyorini, T.J., Dewi, P. & Masykuri, E.S (2020). The Grammatical Error Analysis Found in Students' Composition. *Lensa: Kajian Kebahasaan, Kesusastraan, dan Budaya*. 10 (2) 218-233.
- Yusri, R.M & Jufri. (2018). The Development of Grammar Teaching Material Using Error and Contrastive Analysis (A Linguistic Approach in Foreign Language Teaching). *TESOL International Journal*, 13(3), 2–13.